

INDIVIDUAL INSTRUCTION

1. The meaning and implications of individualized instruction

Individual instruction usually refers to training that is designed and given, on a one-person basis, or with specific reference to individuals, rather than to a group as a unit. It makes possible a maximum adjustment in terms of individual needs, capacities, and interests. Individual instruction enables each learner to progress at his own best rate of speed without hindering the progress of others. Through its use, failure can be eliminated for all except those who are exceedingly deficient, and a maximum range of work can be given because uniformity of results is not desired among class members.

There are certain kinds of learnings that are best taught by group methods. They may be illustrated in field exercises, manual of arms drill, and marching where the aim is uniformity and where deviation from uniformity is undesirable. But there are other areas of learning where uniformity is not paramount, as in the fine or practical arts, technical skills, and in the social sciences. What is desired most in these areas are resourcefulness, originality, initiative, and independence of thought and of execution. Both individual and group instruction are sometimes carried too far by their devotees. This is a weakness to which both are liable, but to which neither need be subject.

Individualized instruction is a reaction against unjustifiable uniformity, against the lock-step procedure, against the wastefulness of daily lesson hearing and of enervating uniform exercises for pupils of varying abilities. But individual instruction is not a panacea, not a cure-all. Poor teaching by any method is still poor teaching. Instruction may be good or bad in either group or individualized training. When instruction is properly individualized it gives every student to whom the instructor may come in contact, the opportunity for wholesome development and growth along suitable lines, up to the limits of his individual capacity.

2. The psychological basis for individualized instruction

No matter how carefully a group of students may be selected on such bases as intelligence, mental attitude, or mechanical aptitude, there still remain fundamental individual differences. These differences may be mental; for intelligence tests do not adequately measure all forms of mental ability; they may be emotional; for emotionality is exceedingly complex, and present tests are but approximate means of measurement; the differences may be volitional; variations in capacity of desire to do things; and finally, these individual differences may be physical in nature. In addition to these four groups of differences there is little wonder that educators have turned to individualized instruction as one of the various ways that are utilized in good education to adapt the work to individual needs.

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3. How to handle individual differences

There are many ways in which resourceful instructors modify assignments to meet individual differences. A few of these will be mentioned here.

- a. Vary the amount of work. All students can be held to their best efforts by a frank recognition of the fact that some should be expected to do more than others. In other words, each should be held for assignments according to his capacities. A few should be held only for the specified minimum. Others should do more. Still others should be held for the maximum amount of work that can be done satisfactorily.

An easy and satisfactory way of modifying the amount of work according to ability is to encourage all students to work as fast as is consistent with the quality to be achieved. While some students complete two projects, others will finish three or four of similar difficulty. Once the ability of the student is known, his assignments can be made in accordance with it.

- b. Varying the difficulty of the work. When work is assigned on an individual basis, it is a relatively easy matter to vary the difficulty of the work to meet the requirements of individuals. Every instructor dealing with individual instruction should have adequate case studies, problems, and other situations upon which he may readily draw. All instructors should know the sources to which the students may be referred so that their capacities for learning may be used to advantage. In handling a "courier" the problem he may receive in "surveillance" may not be the same as that which would be given to a "principal agent". The "courier" should be able to handle his problem satisfactorily. The "principal agent" should be encouraged to attempt something requiring a greater skill of execution and accomplishment.
- c. Varying the nature of the work. Assignments may be made that will take into account a number of factors, such as personal interest, amount of previous experience, and learning difficulties. For good reasons, distinct departures from the usual assignments can be made to an advantage. It is especially desirable to vary the form of problem, exercise, or project one or more times, but would it not be better to call for other exercises or projects which contain the same or closely similar demands upon the skills, insights, or knowledge which are being taught?
- d. Varying the sequence of the units of instruction. Prospective instructors soon learn that in many situations it would be impossible to require all students to follow the same order or sequence of individual instruction. New students must be started on "basic" intelligence while others who have had some experience dealing with intelligence, are started in relation to their experience. Intelligence itself cannot always - or ever frequently - be learned in a given order. Nor is it all certain that such a theoretically logical sequence of operations is desirable if it

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could be arranged. One phase of work may be more difficult to master than another. The differences in skills required often depend more upon the degree of accuracy, or the limits demanded, than upon anything else. But there are other reasons for varying the normal sequence of instruction. For example, it may well be the usual procedure for an instructor to require students to make maps of certain predetermined areas, or make a rough layout of a good meeting place. In some cases students may find difficulty in understanding symbols or visualizing on paper what they saw. The instructor then has to vary the sequence of the units of instruction to fit the needs of the student and his mission.

- e. Varying the routine assignments. Individual differences in interests and capacities can be discovered through try-out and exploratory experiences. It is consequently desirable to rotate the various forms of learning experiences - both routine and other - that come within the range of teaching opportunities. In accordance with this principle, the instructor will see to it that each individual has approximately equal opportunity to test out his liking and capacities for the total range of learning units. This should include theoretical knowledge, manipulative techniques (if any), experience in cooperation or team-work, managerial responsibilities, and those calling for initiative or other desirable traits peculiar to our field work.

One fundamental purpose in varying assignments is that each learner should be developed to think as much as possible. In intelligence, discriminating thinking is needed fully as much as any type manipulative skill. The goal is to combine them wisely. In making assignments the good instructor seeks to make them thought provoking and meaningful.

4. Individual instruction may be social in nature

So much has been said and written about the socializing values of group instruction that there are those who think individual instruction, by way of contrast, must be seriously lacking in this respect. A little reflection will show that this is not even a half truth. Although the instruction that is individualized throughout, deprives the learner of certain advantages that grow out of group participation, it is clear that individual instruction may be directed so as to stimulate effort that can have far-reaching social values. An instructor who handles students on an individualized basis has the opportunity and obligation to guide and direct his learners so that selfish motives will broaden into socially approved goals. Sound democratically conceived intelligence instruction cannot escape responsibility for socializing individual instruction.

To some there appear to be two conflicting ideals in education. They see a conflict between education as a means of self-realization and education for the larger social group. As a matter of fact, the leading educational opinion is to the contrary. Dewey and other eminent philosophers of education hold that the best interests of the individual and those of the larger groups coincide.

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5. Some desirable characteristics of individual instruction

Individual instruction is usually given when, for one reason or another, group instruction is not feasible. It is used to good advantage in supplementing group instruction. Among the characteristics of good individual instruction the following deserve to be mentioned:

- a. The individual differences of the student should serve as points of departure for individual instruction. The purpose is to use such differences by employing methods that will utilize them to an advantage.
- b. The personality traits of the learners should be diagnosed and used toward training growth. Some students are timid and lack self-confidence. This fear can be overcome through friendliness and through encouragement. Others are over confident; they think that their work is better than it is. This attitude may be changed by patiently guiding such pupils to make careful comparisons between their own work and that of others, by the use of objective rating scales, and through carefully judged competitions.
- c. The student's previous background of training and experience should be recognized in good individual instruction. According to this principle, assignments must be based upon due recognition of what the student already knows and can do.
- d. Good individual instruction seeks to integrate experiences, knowledge, attitude, and appreciations into units instead of exposing the individual to too many vaguely related elements of learning.
- e. Good individual instruction has order, sequence, and continuity. It must be planned and has to be checked for achievement. In individual instruction adequate drill is sometimes overlooked, and the instructor may forget just what each member of the group was taught unless he has satisfactory methods of keeping records of the points or units covered.
- f. Good individual instruction is challenging, thought-provoking, and educative. The instructor should distinguish between memorization and analytical thinking; between mere habit formation and creative effort.

6. Difficulties of individualized instruction

It is well to recognize that every form of instruction has its limits and that individual instruction is no exception to this. It is conceivable that individual teaching may foster rugged individualism - that it may promote the attitude of everyone for himself as long as the action is not contrary to the letter of the law. It is also possible that individual instruction may be too indoctrinational - that it will result in imposing upon the student the personal view-points and beliefs of the instructor beyond the bounds of desirability. Still another danger lies in the fact that individual instruction does not offer the same opportunities for frank and many sided discussion. So learning of this type may be somewhat less thorough and less broad. But none of these objections is insurmountable. They need to be

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recognized in order that they may be overcome in one way or another. For example, the lack of group instruction may be overcome to an appreciable extent through extensive observation, collateral reading, and supplemented study.

One of the most common objections to individual instruction comes from persons who claim that it is expensive and time consuming. It is not to be denied that this per pupil hour cost of individual instruction is higher than group teaching and that it takes more time to do. But the way to look upon it is to determine whether or not the higher cost is warranted in order to satisfactorily accomplish your mission and maintain good security.

7. Making self-instruction more effective

The following suggestions for the improvement of individual instruction are offered. To put the suggestions into practice is far from an easy matter. It will take much time and energy to develop instructional aids as mentioned below. They may serve as goals toward which progress is to be made to the extent possible:

- a. Employ suitable pre-tests as a basis for proper student classification and as a means of revealing to the instructor each student's points of strength and weakness.
- b. Stress the time element. Emphasize quality, but do not forget that in our field of endeavor intensive application to the mission as well as the time to do it in is relatively short.
- c. Use self-explanatory instruction sheets. The various forms of instruction sheets that are used, such as operation, case study, problem, and information sheets, should be clear and self-explanatory. This is not to be interpreted as meaning that they should be so detailed as to exclude opportunities for proper self-activity on the part of the learner. On the contrary, it is important to have this material in such a form that it will develop related study, problem solving abilities, and good study habits. This is achieved in part through suitable references and through challenging questions which can be incorporated in the lesson sheets.
- d. The use of training aids is as important to the teaching of one individual as it is to a group. The main modification may be in the use of smaller items. All other aids, such as motion pictures, film strips, slides, Vu-graph, etc., may be used in the same manner, with the same techniques, as would be used for group instruction.
- e. Have available suitable reference material. For the varied type of instruction which has to be taught on an individual basis it is important and very helpful to have a relatively small and yet an adequate reference library.
- f. Develop means of self-evaluation whereby each student may critically analyze his progress and perhaps determine his own weaknesses.

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